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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the perceptions and attitudes of the faculty of a rural community college about their institution's mission. The college serves a 19-county area in central Alabama, characterized by high rates of illiteracy, unemployment, and poverty. Surveys were completed by 74 of the 100 faculty members. Faculty generally supported their college's efforts but believed that additional efforts should be made to meet the various needs of external constituencies. They perceived a consistent lack of understanding of the college's purpose among those they were attempting to serve. Faculty reported that the college's priorities are, and should be, career and technical education, adult and continuing education, and GED education programs. Similarly, faculty agreed that transfer education, health education, and recreational education programs should be, and are, the lower priorities for the college. In the economically depressed and rural area of this study, priorities did not differ significantly from national ideals for the community college: preparing individuals for work and providing them with basic skills. (SV)

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The Rural Community College Mission:

One Faculty's Report

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Introduction

Community, junior, and technical colleges have typically been portrayed as the dynamic and responsive "face" of higher education (Alfred & Linder, 1990). Quick response time to business and industry needs, for example, have helped community colleges become a major force in the offering of training and development programs (Sorrentino & Hines, 1994). Additionally, two-year colleges have become a leader in providing adult, remedial and developmental, leisure, recreational, and continuing education programs (Masoner & Miller, 1995).

The comprehensive and changing nature of community colleges, however, has been a defining aspect of stress in academic administration in these colleges (Cloud, 1992). Additionally, many community colleges are relying less on external labor markets to fill their administrative needs (Twombly, 1988), although this may be somewhat dependent upon geographic location and personal-life attributes (Twombly & Moore, 1987).

The result of a rapidly changing expectation of two-year colleges coupled with more formal administrative specializations and broad-based program offerings has resulted in public questions of quality and access. Through a demand-driven outlook on community service and the perpetuation of this "drive" by the in-house training of administrators, colleges have been criticized by some for their lack of academic integrity and "indiscriminate responsiveness" (Eaton, 1992). These same criticisms have been made publicly in Alabama, and have been the

driving force in calls for postsecondary education reform, particularly in areas of low-density populations where there is a greater reliance on two-year colleges to serve multiple functions.

The purpose for conducting this study was to identify the priorities for the mission of a community college in rural Alabama. Inherent in this description is the definition of which programmatic offerings should be at the forefront of the college's mission. Central Alabama, one of the most economically depressed areas in the United States, provides an ideal setting for developing a better understanding of what faculty believe they and their colleges are responsible for in terms of service to their rural host communities.

The Two-Year College Mission

The concept of the community college has gone through dramatic changes during the past three decades. General trends indicate a shift from the relatively costly provision of job training programs to the less expensive and high demand offering of four-year college transfer programs. While institutional mission has been difficult to conclusively define (Doucette & Richardson, 1985), the rural community college has remained a vital component in the provision of offering postsecondary education.

The current mission of community colleges has been classified as consisting of three distinct dimensions (DiCroce,

1989). First, the community college has been viewed as a partner to secondary schools in providing practical job training and career oriented education opportunities that are economically and geographically accessible. Present in this local service-based concept is the integration of lifelong learning strategies (Parnell, 1985).

Roueche and Baker (1987) argued that community colleges function with a dual purpose to provide wide-access to those in their community, while assuring excellence in the programs offered. They contended that despite arguments that open access equates with low academic standards, the two can indeed co-exist, and they offered Miami-Dade Community College as evidence of this co-existence. Additionally, Roueche and Baker stressed the need for two-year college administrators to be willing to accept reform measures, while providing the much needed leadership to their respective institutions.

Cohen and Brawer (1987) argued the need for comprehensive community colleges. By providing service to a host of constituencies, the institutions serve as "democracy's college," and serve as a pathway to further education and the world of work. These authors also called for the need for community college administrators and teachers to work across traditional curricula, and integrate or "link" the liberal arts with more functional programs, such as occupational and technical education.

The rural community college may not have identical challenges to those in more metropolitan areas, yet Sullins and Atwell (1986) called for these colleges to at least provide transfer and occupational and technical educational opportunities. Those in rural areas place a similar value on educational achievement and opportunity (Kuvlesky & Copp, 1981), however, due to their remote geographic location, may have difficulty in participating in formal learning. The added issue of economic disadvantages may also deter students from pursuing postsecondary education. The rural community college thus plays a vital role in the economic, educational, and social development of their respective communities.

Issues of health services, technology access and use, and job training are also central to context of the rural community (Pittman, 1995). Van Alfen (1994) emphasized the importance of developing consensus among participants in rural education to effectively develop and implement policy. While the assumptions of participatory governance are not absolute (Birnbaum, 1988), the current study assumed a relationship between faculty involvement in decision making and developing a vision and subsequent mission for postsecondary education.

Adding to the need to examine the mission of the rural community college in Alabama are the unique challenges which confront the area. In the 19-county area of study, illiteracy averaged 11.84% with a range of 4.80% in one county to 18.30% in another. Unemployment averaged 13.51% for the community

college's service area, and the per capita income for the service area had a mean of $8,645. Indeed, the issue of providing educational opportunities to this service area beyond the secondary school is paramount.

Procedures

As the purpose for conducting this study was exploratory in nature, survey research methods were employed. A small, comprehensive community college in central Alabama was selected for study based on its diversity in program offerings, rural setting, and willingness to participate in the study. All faculty (n=100) were distributed a researcher-developed survey instrument during the 1992-1993 academic year using the college's campus mail service. The college was considered comprehensive in that it offered both vocational and avocational programming leading to degrees, certificates, and transfer opportunities. The college enrolled approximately 1,500 full-time students.

The survey requested categorical responses to questions on the current adequacy of program offerings, the need for expansion of these offerings, a definition of current programmatic priorities, and what respondents believed should be programmatic priorities. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement in each of these areas using a one-to-five Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

The survey instrument was tested and validated through personal review, and the administration of the survey to other

populations throughout the State of Alabama. The instrument achieved a Cronbach alpha of .80. For the purposes of this study, the instrument was assumed to be valid and accurate in collecting necessary data.

Findings

After using one follow-up survey distribution, a total usable response rate of 74% was achieved (n=74). The response was assumed to be representative of the entire college's faculty, and was subsequently deemed adequate for the current investigation.

Respondents achieved a 3.70 group mean agreement level on the need to offer additional postsecondary educational opportunities in the area. The concept of additional opportunities being presented to the area was reinforced by the lower 2.21 group mean rating of the statement "there is no need for additional postsecondary educational opportunities." Conversely, responding faculty achieved a 3.53 group mean on the statement indicating that current offerings were "sufficient."

Faculty supported the basic goals of the college (mean 4.53), but indicated (4.04 mean rating) that the college needed to make additional efforts to reach a broader range of the population. Faculty disagreed that the general public (2.87), politicians (2.79), governmental bodies (2.90), local agencies (2.94) had a sufficient understanding in the community of the goals and objectives of their college. Additionally, faculty

moderately agreed that community leaders (3.08) and students (3.51) had sufficient understanding of their college's goals and objectives.

Faculty rated their agreement with what "should be a priority" and what currently is a priority for their college. Respondents had an overall higher agreement with what "should be a priority" (group mean 4.11) as compared to their college's current priority (group mean 3.65). Specific priorities the respondent's college "should" have included: career and technical education (4.60), adult and continuing education (4.36), GED education programs (4.32), credit adult and continuing education programs (4.26), and literacy education (4.19). Faculty identified the current priorities of their college as: GED education (4.04), career and technical education (4.03), adult and continuing education (3.87), general college level work not leading to a degree (3.78), and non-credit adult and continuing education programs (3.73). The complete listing of priorities has been presented in Table 1.

Discussion

The purpose for conducting this study was to identify what a rural community college faculty perceived to be their institution's mission. Additionally, the survey instrument was designed to identify what the faculty perceived their priorities should be to effectively serve their community.

To place these priorities in context, faculty reported that they generally supported their college's efforts, but believed that additional efforts should be made to meet the various needs of external constituencies. Faculty perceived a consistent lack of understanding of the college's purpose among those they were attempting to serve, and no strong agreement or disagreement was found concerning the need to offer additional programs to their local community.

Consistent with the idea of supporting their college's efforts and programs, faculty had near parallel rankings for what the college's priorities are and should be. Faculty reported that the college's priorities should be career and technical education, adult and continuing education, and GED education programs. These same three priorities were seen as the college's top three current efforts. Similarly, faculty agreed that transfer education, health education, and recreational education programs should be and are the lower priorities for the college.

These findings suggest that college faculty are generally supportive of their administration, and believe that their efforts are well directed at their publics' needs. Efforts to involve faculty in governance processes and the use of advisory committees in curriculum and program planning may indeed support this contention. Conversely, these findings could represent an attempt to maintain the status quo and a "business as usual" mentality. Recent claims of faculty abuse of their positions, an

"ivory tower" mentality, and the threat of internal reallocation may all support the later contention.

Not unique to the rural community college is the idea of comprehensiveness. Serving those who need basic or remedial education, providing leisure education opportunities, preparing individuals for careers, and still offering transfer opportunities have consistently been seen as the role of two-year colleges. In the economically depressed and rural area of study, the priorities did not differentiate significantly from national ideals. The top priorities for this community college were to prepare individuals for work and to provide them with basic skills.

As the federal government re-conceptualizes job training programs, and relies increasingly on the Department of Labor, every effort must be made to assure that these two-year colleges maintain a presence where basic education can be integrated into the fundamentals of job training. Distance education programs can not supplant what must be done at the local level, and the ability of local colleges to successfully respond to community needs must maintain a significant role in the future mission of community colleges.

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Table 1

Perceptions of the Appropriate Function for Community Colleges Reported by Mean Score (N=74)

Function	Should Be A Priority	Currently Is A Priority
Literacy education	4.19	3.70
GED education	4.32	4.04
General college level work not leading to a degree	4.08	3.78
Transfer education leading to a 4-year degree	3.94	3.14
Career and technical ed.	4.60	4.03
Adult and continuing ed.	4.36	3.87
Credit adult and continuing ed. programs	4.26	3.65
Non-credit adult and continuing ed. programs	4.10	3.73
Health education	3.93	3.50
Recreational education	3.32	3.06